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3. TECHNIQUES OF ERROR CORRECTION: ORAL WORK

General Considerations

Some general remarks are necessary before examining specific techniques. Numerous scholars have recommended placing more emphasis on correction during drill than during communication activities (Cathcart and Olsen 1976; Chastain 1971, 1981; Knop 1980; Rivers 1975). Drill stresses linguistic patterns and accuracy, while communication is a time for experimentation and creating the desire to continue speaking the target language.

Several other researchers have stressed not interrupting the student too quickly. While studying elementary science students, Rowe (1974) found that if the teacher waited three to five seconds to intervene after asking a question (instead of the typical one second), student responses increased dramatically. Holley and King (1971) asked their graduate teachers to wait five to ten seconds after a student began to speak. With this change, the students were able to correct their own errors 50 percent of the time. A characteristic of the outstanding teachers observed by Moskowitz (1976) is that they waited longer to correct errors. Other researchers have supported this idea (Joiner 1975, Mitchell 1978). Not interrupting is carried even farther in Gattegno's "silent way" technique, where the teacher never interrupts. Gattegno (1976) believes that silence is necessary because the students have work to do to learn a language, and the teacher would only interfere.

A third suggestion that one finds frequently in the literature is that the teacher should attempt to avoid errors whenever possible. This does not refer to the attempts made by the proponents of the audiolingual method to develop elaborate drills; it simply means to avoid confusion. McTear (1976) points out that errors may result simply because students do not know what procedure is being used in class. Stenson (1974) cites several areas (vocabulary, syntax, drills) where

ability could artificially create errors. Fanselow (1977) observed behavior on the part of 11 teachers that induced errors. Their actions included interrupting too quickly, asking for ambiguous word choices, giving inexplicit directions for drills, and using vague correction techniques that led to error repetition. Knop (1980) has identified three sources of unnecessary errors--confusion, tension, and boredom--and has provided numerous suggestions for correcting these problems. Herron (1981) recommends that when teachers do oral drills with students, they should make the directions clear, make the drills interesting, and require repetitions to reduce student errors.

One of the greatest subjects of controversy in error correction is whether or not to use the student's error in the correction technique. It has long been an axiom of foreign language teaching that incorrect forms should not be given to students because errors are as easy to learn as correct forms (Grew 1964, Mitchell 1978). However, the survey that Cathcart and Olsen made (1976) showed that ESL students liked having the error and the correct forms compared as a teaching technique. Others have suggested a pairing of correct and incorrect forms (Holley and King 1971), even to the extent of writing them on the board (Fanselow 1977). Corder (1973) is a firm believer in using "negative instances" or "what is not an example" (i.e., errors). He feels that these will help resolve learners' problems by getting to the source of the error. Because there is no research to support either side of the argument, one can only conclude that extreme care should be used when adapting learner errors to correction techniques. The teacher should contrast them with the correct forms and make it clear which ones are wrong.

The last general consideration is one that all researchers and teachers can agree on. Teachers should make corrections in a positive manner. Vigil and Oller (1976) found that predominantly negative feedback discourages student participation. Teachers should correct gently and with respect. This is especially true with oral work because it is almost always in front of others. Students respond much better to this approach than to criticism (Moskowitz 1976). The use of positive techniques and the avoidance of embarrassing students were some of my primary considerations when setting up the following hierarchy of persons who should correct errors.

In this monograph I have adopted as the most productive for language learning the following hierarchy of persons who correct errors: first, the student who made the error; second, other students in the class; and last, the teacher.

Students are capable of correcting their own errors (Gattegno 1976). Krashen and Pon (1975) found that an advanced language learner was able to correct 95 percent of her own errors. Robbins (1977) found that intermediate ESL students could locate 27 percent of their errors and then correct about half of those. Others quote the figure of a 50 percent possibility for self-correction (Holley and King 1971, White 1977). Thus, allowing students to correct their own mistakes could reduce teacher talk of this type by one-half and also reduce the intimidation factor introduced by excessive criticism. One can assume that students would acquire more feelings of self-sufficiency if allowed to pursue this course of action.

Peer correction is another way to involve students actively in the teaching of the class. Stevick (1980) warns that it can invite unfavorable comparison between students, but he goes on to point out that it is a more informative way of correcting errors because it comes from someone who has had the same experience (also Burt and Kiparsky 1972). It is also less threatening because no grade is involved. Obviously, the teacher has to be careful to avoid calling on the same student or small group all the time, because the others may be sensitive to favoritism. However, peer correction can have several advantages. First, it may motivate students who previously thought a foreign language was impossible to learn, because they see their classmates using it correctly. Second, peer correction involves a greater number of students in the running of the class. Third, the corrections tend to be at a level that others in the class can understand. And last, self- and peer correction increase the amount of time students talk in class and reduce the amount of time that the teacher must talk.

The teacher will also have to correct errors. Courchène (1980) points out that current theories of language learning stress hypothesis formation on the part of the learner. To test these hypotheses of rule formation, the learner must have an "auto-corrective capacity." Therefore, the teacher should correct errors as a last resort.

In three studies involving classroom observations, teacher correction proved to be the most frequent technique (Cathcart and Olsen 1976, Fanselow 1977, Lucas 1976). Fanselow warns that simply giving the correct answer does not establish a pattern for long-term memory. Lucas states that giving the right answer may just be a reflex action triggered when the teacher hears an error. This is entirely possible, because Cathcart and Olsen report that providing the correct model is the most frequent technique in actual use, but only third on the list of teacher preferences. In other words, in that particular study, teachers gave the answer more than they realized.

Certainly the teacher will have to give a correct answer, if only to save time or avoid the confusion of multiple errors. Ramirez and Stromquist (1979) found that the overt correction of oral grammatical errors is positively associated with student growth. However, students may still not understand why their sentences are wrong, or perhaps will not even hear the correction.

*Techniques**

Self-correction

Although the students correct their own errors, the teacher does play a role by calling attention to the fact that a statement contains an inaccuracy.

Pinpointing. This is the term Cathcart and Olsen (1976) use to describe the teacher's localizing an error without giving it away. In their study, this was the technique that ESL teachers preferred. Knop (1980) suggests repeating the student's sentence up to the error. This can be a very effective technique for correcting student-generated sentences (versus a sentence from the textbook with a blank to be filled in). The last word before the error should have a slightly exaggerated vowel length and trailing intonation for the student to catch the idea that the fragment needs to be completed again.

*All the examples given below are original. Readers may wish to consult the sources for additional examples.

S: Demain, je vais aller à le supermarché.
T: Je vais aller . . .
S: Je vais aller au supermarché.

S: Yo veo mi amigo.
T: Yo veo . . .
S: Yo veo a mi amigo.

Rephrasing question. Holley and King (1971) suggest rephrasing the question in order to reduce the number of words. This technique should be used when the student indicates a lack of understanding of the question but does not make a grammatical error.

T: Why did you decide to come to this country?
S: [hesitation]
T: Why are you here?
S: I come here to learn English.
T: I . . .
S: I came here to learn English.

Joiner (1975) suggests rephrasing not only to reduce the number of words but also to change an information question to a yes-no question. For example, "Where were you born?" could be changed to "Were you born in the United States?"

Cueing (Holley and King 1971). The teacher gives the grammatical variations of a key content word. This is possible when a student indicates difficulty forming a specific word.

T: ¿Conoce Ud. a mucha gente de Madrid?
S: No, no . . .
T: Conoce, conoces, conozco . . .
S: No conozco a mucha gente de Madrid.

T: What did you bring to class?
S: I . . .
T: Bring, brought . . .
S: I brought my books.

Generating simple sentences (Holley and King 1971). With this technique, the teacher provides several possible answers to the question just asked, thereby relaxing the constraints. Like rephrasing the question, this is a technique to use when the student shows a lack of understanding of an entire question.

- T: Was lesen Sie gern?
 S: [puzzled look]
 T: Ich lese Kriegsromane gern. Ich lese Krimis auch gern. Ich lese die Zeitung gern.
 S: Ich lese Krimis gern.
- T: Qu'est-ce que vous faites samedi soir?
 S: [no response]
 T: Moi, je vais au cinéma, je regarde la télévision, je sors avec des amis.
 S: Je regarde la télévision.

Explain key word (Joiner 1975). This can be done by writing a difficult word on the board or by acting it out. The former technique is particularly useful when the phoneme-grapheme relationship causes a problem.

- T: D'où viens-tu?
 S: [no response]
 T: [writes] D'où [asks] Tu viens de . . .
 S: Je viens du Canada.

Acting out a word is frequently possible, depending on its meaning. The meaning of verbs is generally the easiest to get across.

- T: ¿Sabe Ud. conducir un coche?
 S: Yo . . . sé . . .
 T: [gestures: hands on an imaginary steering wheel]
 S: Yo se conducir un coche.

If possible, gestures should be culturally authentic. To demonstrate the meaning of French *boire* or Spanish *beber*, for example, the teacher should have a clenched fist with a thumb pointing to the mouth rather than having the hand grasp an imaginary glass, as Americans do.

Questioning (Burt and Kiparsky 1972). If the student uses a word that the teacher does not understand, the teacher should ask a question about it. The student should reveal the meaning of the word without recourse to the native language and without making an obvious correction.

- S: I am studying to be [incomprehensible word]
 T: Why do you want to do that?
 S: I like to help people.

T: How will you help them?

S: They can see better.

T: Yes, an optometrist does that.

This may be a roundabout way to correct, but it provides oral practice.

Repetition. Cohen (1975) advises teachers to ask a student to repeat the sentence containing the error. The technique is deliberately ambiguous, so the students do not feel they have been corrected. Fanselow (1977) takes exception to this because it is too vague, and the student may not realize that an error has been made or where it is. Perhaps if the teacher says the target language word for "Repeat" or "Again" with a questioning look, the message would be clearer. It is a technique to try with the better students in class who need a challenge.

"No." Shaking one's head from side to side is also criticized by Fanselow as being too vague. However, it can be used effectively in certain areas. If the class were concentrating on a particular point of grammar, especially an "either-or" choice, the students would understand. (For example, a wrong choice between *sit* and *set* in English, the imperfect and *passé composé* in French, *kennen*, *wissen*, and *können* in German, and *ser* and *estar* in Spanish could be corrected by shaking the head "no." Because the students realize they are choosing among two or three alternatives, the gesture would cause them to rethink the answer.) Like repetition, this method can also be used with more advanced students. It is certainly more subtle than pointing to an X on the blackboard, as Cohen (1975) suggests.

Grammatical terms. Localizing an error by mentioning what function it plays in the sentence (e.g., "verb") can have limited use. This practice eliminates destroying the student's chain of thought in the middle of a long sentence. Obviously, it is only useful with students who understand the vocabulary and who are fairly proficient. It should be noted that this technique does not focus on communication but rather on form or linguistic correctness.

S: I came to the U.S. on plane in 1978.

T: Preposition?

S: By plane. I came by plane.

S: ¿Quiero que me des un ejemplo?
 T: ¿Subjuntivo?
 S: Quiero que me des un ejemplo.

Gestures. Under certain circumstances, errors can be corrected nonverbally. The students must be looking at the teacher, so exercises read from a book or conversations between students would not apply. The great advantage of using gestures is that there is no additional verbal input to confuse the student. Furthermore, gestures often take less time than verbal corrections. Error correction and explanation often cause the student to forget the original question or part of the answer. The process must then start over, and time is wasted. Proponents of the audiolingual method encouraged teachers to develop an elaborate system for indicating which students were to respond (whole class, one row, an individual) or the type of response desired (repeat, listen). Teachers may find several of these gestures useful.

- Yes-no. Nodding or shaking the head will get a student to continue or stop an utterance.
- Continue. Rolling the hand in a forward circle at the wrist will encourage a student who hesitates for fear of having made a mistake or let a student know that the sentence is not complete.
- Stop. Holding the palms toward a student will stop an unwanted interruption or an unnecessary lapse into the native language.
- Syntax. Flipping one hand over the other will let a student know that the word order is wrong.

T: Do you want these books?

S: Yes, give them me.

T: [gestures]

S: Give me them.

T: ¿Qué es esto?

S: Es una roja pluma

T: [gestures]

S: Una pluma roja.

- Number. Singular can be indicated with one finger; plural with several. A wiggling motion will emphasize the latter. These gestures can be used with any part of speech that shows number and can be combined with pinpointing, if necessary.

T: Haben Sie Schwestern?
S: Ja; ich habe eine Schwestern.
T: eine . . . [gesture]
S: eine Schwester.

- **Stress.** Gattegno (1976) developed a nonverbal way to indicate which syllable of a word carries the stress. On the extended index finger of one hand, the teacher taps out the rhythm of the word with the other index finger, using a more forceful tap on the stressed syllable. This can be very useful because the languages commonly taught in North America all differ widely in their approach to accentuation.
- **Elision.** In languages where forms are elided, a gesture can indicate this type of error. The teacher puts the two palms parallel to each other and then moves them closer together in a pushing motion. Other simple gestures can indicate liaison and intonation.
- **Missing word.** Gattegno recommends a gesture to show that the student has left a word out. The teacher holds up all fingers and points to each one as the student repeats the sentence. When the student arrives at the missing word, the teacher exaggerates the gesture to indicate that word.

S: Je ne suis allé au laboratoire.
T & S: Je . . . ne . . . suis [gesture] . . .
pas allé . . .
- **Tense.** A gesture of the hand can indicate that a sentence should be in the past (thrown over the shoulder) or the future (moved forward). To be more clear, the teacher could accompany the motion with the name of the tense until the students learn the meaning.
- **Grammatical terms plus gestures.** Schachter (1981) combines grammatical terminology with gestures. The teacher can form six letters of the alphabet designated to represent time, agreement, plural, preposition, word order, and article errors. Schachter maintains that teachers can train students to understand these nonverbal corrections even if the students are not sophisticated enough to understand the terminology. She provides

examples of frequent errors in the ESL classroom; similar combinations could be developed for errors in other languages.

- Other gestures. Almost any repetitive type of mistake can be controlled with a gesture once the students adapt to its use. When Moskowitz (1976) compared outstanding teachers with average teachers, she found the former to be much more active nonverbally, and to use gestures that were instructional rather than personal.

Peer Correction

There are no specific techniques for getting students to correct one another's errors in class. The teacher can use any of the techniques for self-correction suggested above simply by calling on another student who understood what he or she was trying to indicate to the first student. The technique of generating simple sentences, mentioned above, can be particularly effective. Instead of the teacher's providing possible answers, several students can do the same thing. The teacher can then return to the student who made the original error, and it will seem as if no correction had been made.

As mentioned earlier, the problem in peer correction is to avoid unfavorable comparisons between students. One can achieve this by seeking examples from other students rather than by asking for explanations. The teacher should not ask, "What was that mistake?" but should simply ask the same question of someone else. The teacher should give all students a chance to provide corrections. Since the first person to answer a question is at a disadvantage over those who hear a partial answer or have longer to think, it is possible for weak students to correct more proficient ones. It is up to the teacher to maintain a spirit of cooperation among classmates and a positive attitude toward the making and correcting of errors.

Teacher Correction

Providing correct answer. Although this has been widely criticized as not demonstrating that real learning is taking place (e.g., Fanselow 1977), there comes a time when the teacher must tell the class what the proper form is. Often it

is a question of saving time or reducing confusion, especially when two errors must be corrected. The teacher should return to the student who made the error, ask for a repetition or reformulation, and look for a glimmer of understanding.

OLD. Burt and Kiparsky (1972) propose "Own Language Distortion." The teacher translates into the native language an improper syntactic element a student has made to demonstrate how shocking it sounds. In other words,

Fr: *Ne donnez-le-moi pas

Sp: *No de me lo

sound as bad as

Eng: *Don't it to me give.

In practice, the student may not remember whether it was the affirmative or negative imperative that sounded bad. Some may feel that this is an unnecessary lapse back into the native language.

Discrimination exercises. Fanselow (1977) recommends contrasting the correct and incorrect forms, even to the extent of writing lists on the board and asking students for explanations of each item.

S: I take a course in history.

T: I take? I am taking? [discussion]

Paraphrasing. Hanzeli (1975) recommends paraphrasing a syntactic error, while Joiner (1975) suggests modeling the incorrect sentence with the proper substitution but without calling attention to the correction. The problem here is that many students may not hear the difference between the two. A fairly important error, such as articles in French, word stress in English and Spanish, and case in German, may be understood only as a variation in pronunciation. The teacher should use this technique when a more direct correction would have a negative effect.

The above list includes many more techniques than any one teacher could use. The proper selection will depend on many factors. Student sensitivity to correction, atmosphere, pace and level of the course, and goals are just a few of the criteria that one must take into account before the ultimate selection process--trial and error.

It must be noted that all these techniques apply to teacher-directed activities. It would be unreasonable, for example, to expect this type of correction in small-group work. Lantolf (1977) suggests using the latter to encourage speech rather than grammatical accuracy.

An additional problem with oral work is deciding what to do with sentences that are entirely correct. Many teachers repeat the utterance verbatim for a variety of reasons: others in the class can hear it better; they will hear a better pronunciation; and it will reinforce the correct response. The author has observed many beginning teachers who often repeat answers simply as a nervous habit. Students should be encouraged to speak louder so that everyone can hear. Otherwise, the teacher's repetitions may be taken to be corrections. In any exchange of language, students should understand that they have communicated successfully.

4. TECHNIQUES OF ERROR CORRECTION: WRITTEN WORK

General Considerations

Wingfield (1975) states that there are five ways for the teacher to approach the correction of written compositions: (1) providing clues for self-correction; (2) correcting the text; (3) making marginal notes; (4) explaining errors orally to students; and (5) using errors as an illustration for class discussion. He prefers self-correction by the students.

Correcting compositions is not unlike correcting oral errors. Correction by the student who made the error or by others in the class can precede teacher correction. Once again, one has to wonder if simply providing the correct response will benefit the student in the long run. Students may have problems remembering such superficial input, or may not even bother to read written corrections (Phillips 1968).

As in the case of oral expression, many scholars recommend correcting only major errors in written work. Robinett (1972) suggests correcting paragraphs for specific errors such as spelling, punctuation, or articles. Hendrickson (1980) feels that students lose confidence when they see too many corrections. Grittner believes that teachers should give more emphasis to what is correct than to what is wrong (1977). Walker (1973) reports that his survey found university students to be discouraged by excessive correcting. They spend so much time on details that they are afraid of losing their overall ability. On the other hand, Lalande (1981) opposes this selectivity on several grounds: (1) unlike oral work, the correction of written errors is done in private; (2) students need a considerable amount of feedback about their ability; (3) communication is not the only purpose for writing; it may be possible that an author wishes to gain respect. He concludes that important differences between oral and written language make the error correction analogy between them false.